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ABSTRACT

Television's messages about sex role behavior were analyzed by collecting and coding spot samples of the ten top ranked programs in prime viewing time and proportionate numbers of daytime soap operas and Saturday morning children's programs. The content analysis was based on a relational coding system developed to assess interpersonal communication between two people. The results indicated that the depicted communication patterns were dominated by young, white, male characters; that most messages were dominance messages of a "masculine language style," whether delivered by male or female speakers; and that the communication patterns tended to place the female receiver in a more submissive position. Analyzed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, these results suggested that television and the interpersonal communication patterns it projects act as socializing agents on the viewers, creating a distorted view of society's expectations for sex role behavior. (Author/RL)

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A STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE:

RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION MESSAGES

IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

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A STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE:

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Edith to Archie: Oh, Archie. I would never change to the Catholic Church

Archie to Edith: O.K., Edith. After this, leave the thinking to me around here. You just do the useful things. Get me a beer.

And so another episode of All in the Family comes to an end. As the television viewer leaves the world of the Bunker family one wonders about the effect of this fictional behavior. Has the interaction between Archie and Edith merely provided another half-hour of diversion and laughs, or has it provided a model from which the viewer takes instruction in interpersonal behavior?

The producer of the program and the television industry in general suggests the former:[1]

> ...You don't get warmth without friction, so I rub my characters together harder and I get the theatrical friction I need. And the laughter.

There is no doubt that Archie Bunker gets the laughs. Others question, however, the degree to which the "theatrical friction" is not only producing laughs but also reinforcing values and attitudes. As one critic suggests:[2]

> ...each time we send a message we at least implicitly hope to affect the way our audience perceives some part of his world, relates and responds to some part of his environment.

Norman Lear would not suggest that his goal is to reinforce racism and authoritarianism, or to model ineffective patterns of interpersonal communication behavior. This appears, however, to be the effect for many viewers of

All in the Family.[3] Although results vary, one critic goes so far as to propose that it is the very reinforcement of prejudice that brings the viewers back week after week.[4]

Perhaps more important than the specific findings of these studies, however, is the prespective which they provide to the nature of the medium in general. Unlike the position of Norman Lear, most mass media research assumes that there is more to television programming than just entertainment. From this perspective it becomes important to identify the kinds of messages the medium is presenting to its viewers and the process by which these messages are affecting the way the viewer, in the words of Schramm, "perceives some part of his world, relates and responds to some part of his environment."[5]

Part of the way we relate to our world is a function of sex role expectations. Along with race and age, "sex labels predict a great deal of a person's behavior and other's behavior toward the person."[6] It is the purpose of this study to identify television's messages about sex role behavior, particularly as they are found in the interpersonal communication patterns of the characters in commercial entertainment programming. The study includes prime time, soap opera, and Saturday morning children's programming.

Theoretical Rationale

Pursuing such a study assumes the position that television programming affects the viewer's perception of the world, and in turn, him/herself. Rationale for this assumption is found in symbolic interaction theory as proposed by Mead[7] and Cooley.[8] Central to this perspective is the concept of self as a social phenomenon. Accordingly, the conception we have of ourselves develops in substantial part from our perception of how others perceive us, a process described as "entering the perspective of the other."[9] From Mead's point of view, all of society is built on relationships between people, and

in turn on the individual's ability to understand the attitudes of others. Thus, the individual looks to the behaviors of others as clues as to how society expects him/her to act.

From this perspective, sex role behavior, as well as other dimensions of self-concept, is seen as developing primarily from a social process rather than merely as a result of genetic information. What one deems to be appropriate behavior for one's self as a woman or a man, then, may be seen as developing from the expectations one perceives from others in the society. The behaviors of television characters might well provide these clues for the viewer. If this is the case, television becomes a socializing agent, a perspective summarized by Sidney Head:[10]

> In the past children learned this (socializing) behavior from parents, peer groups, formal education and the rites of initiation. Now the media generally and television especially share in this function.

The theme appears more recently in the rationale of the Basic Skills and Educational Proficiency Act authorizing funding of television research on the basis that "the most omnipotent educator increasingly becomes the media."[11]

Empirical observation appears to support this conclusion. Children do model behavior they see in television programming[12] and one way they use these models is to gain insight into adult roles they may later fill.[13] Children solve problems in a way that they think their favorite television character would,[14] and describe occupations according to the characteristics found on television rather than by those they encounter in their other life experiences.[15]

For a woman, the perception of "ideal-self" has been found to vary depending on how much television she watches. Heavy viewers choose traits emphasized in television programming.[16] In addition, heavy viewers have more traditional sex role stereotypes than do light viewers.[17]

Since television appears to function as a source of information about what viewers see as appropriate social behavior, the analysis of its socializing messages becomes important.

The Problem

Mass media have a long history of conveying stereotypic sex role messages. From etiquette books[18] and advice columns in magazines and newspapers,[19] to the fiction and drama of print as well as electronic media,[20] to be male is to be dominant, to be female is to be submissive. One might take the perspective, of course, that this is not a problem but rather a pro-social effect of mass media, i.e., the presentation of constructive behaviors.[21] It appears, however, that sex role stereotypes have a negative effect on female self-concept, defining behavior traits for women which neither men nor women admire.[22] In addition, recent research relating to the concept of androgyny suggests that non-sex typed behavior is more flexible and effective.[23]

One aspect of sex role stereotyping is the attribution of different language styles as appropriate to males and females. In general, the masculine language style is seen as dominant and the feminine style as submissive.[24] In addition, language style may be seen as conveying information about the relationship between communicators. Following on the work of Bateson,[25] Watzlawick et al., posit information at two levels: the report or content of a message; and the command aspect which asserts dominance or submission. The effect of the command aspect of a message is to impose behavior:[26]

> The command aspect refers to what sort of message it is to be taken as, and therefore, ultimately to the relationship between the communicants.

The information conveyed in the interaction between Edith and Archie quoted above provides, then, more than an understanding by Archie that Edith is not going to change her religious affiliation. Archie's message at the command

level is an assertion of dominance in the relationship.

Language becomes particularly important when sex role behavior is seen from the point of view of symbolic interaction theory. It is through language (verbal and nonverbal) that we give off information about ourselves and obtain information about how others perceive us. One of the things that language expresses is one's perceived association with sex role expectations.[27]

While there is a growing body of research on the sex role messages presented in television programming, none has addressed the problem at the level of relational communication. For the most part, characters and their behavior have been categorized according to frequency of appearance,[28] occupation role,[29] or interpersonal role[30] as differentiated by sex. While useful at a general level, these studies do not provide us with the specific ways that sex role information might be conveyed. The occupational role of a Mary Tyler Moore or a Charlie's Angel, for example, may not be stereotypic, but the behavior in that role may give off cues of stereotypic submissive female behavior.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses advanced in this study are based on two considerations: (1) the pattern revealed by previous research indicating sex role stereotyping in mass media content, and (2) the pressures on television programming to appeal to a truly heterogeneous, mass audience.

As suggested earlier, previous research reveals an almost startling consistency: males are presented as stereotypically male -- active, hardworking, curious, and intelligent -- and females are presented as stereotypically female -- frivolous, seductive, motherly, and domestic. When assessing television programming, however, it is important to realize that commercial network programming, to a greater degree than other mass media content, must

attract a truly mass audience. Not wanting to alienate a large contingent of viewers, television programming is sensitive to social pressure. The pressure of the Civil Rights Movement to change the protrayal of Blacks in television programming, for example, might find a parallel in the pressure of the Women's Movement to change the portrayal of women. As one critic suggests, however, "the television industry protects itself by putting in a double consciousness."[31] As the Civil Rights Commission Report of 1977 concludes:[32]

> Women and Black leading characters could be inserted into the white man's world of television drama as long as they did not usurp his power. As a result, the female cop would still be saved by her superiors, and her female guile, beauty, and sense of humor would be her sources of strength.

One might expect then, that while the industry may feel the need to depart from the "I Love Lucy" stereotype of women, that change would be from the perspective of white, male values.

Based on the general findings of sex role stereotyping of previous research and on the way in which the industry has responded to pressure for change in the past, the following hypotheses were advanced regarding the kinds of interpersonal communication behaviors likely to be found between men and women in television programming:

H_1: Males will give the majority of the messages

H_2: The majority of the messages will be dominance ("masculine language style") messages

H_3: Females will receive more dominance messages than will males

Testing the first and second hypotheses should provide an indication of the degree to which the interpersonal communication patterns in television programming provide a diversity of communication styles for males as well as females. If males dominate in the amount of messages given, and if the

traditional "masculine style" of communication (i.e., dominance) describes the kinds of messages given, one might conclude that the pattern of male dominance is maintained despite the inclusion of women in the programming.

Testing the third hypothesis should provide a more detailed description of the degree to which women are being allowed to assume the traditionally more valued "male" role. Females may be cast in lead roles and given a high proportion of dominance messages, for example, but "kept in their place" by a difference from males in the proportion of the kinds of messages that they receive.

Procedures

For the purpose of assessing differences between communicators, the content analysis design is that described by Holsti as the description of the attributes of messages.[33] Hypotheses are tested by comparing messages produced by two different sources (male, female) and directed to two different recipients (male, female), across three different content variables (dominance, submission, equality).

Sample. Within the universe of television programming, three general types of fictional, dramatic programming were chosen on the basis of general audience differences: prime time, daytime, and Saturday morning. The sample of programs includes a random selection of three episodes each from an eight-week broadcast period of the top ten ranked programs in prime time (as measured by the Nielson Index) and a proportionate random sample of soap operas and Saturday morning children's programs. The prime time sample includes three episodes each of All in the Family, Laverne and Shirley, MASH, Happy Days, Charlie's Angels, Barretta, Bionic Woman, Six Million Dollar Man, One Day at a Time, and The Waltons. The soap opera sample includes Love of Live, Ryan's Hope, Search for Tomorrow, All My Children, One Life to Live, Another

World, The Doctors, and Guiding Light. The Saturday morning cartoon sample includes Scooby Doo, Super Friends, Land of the Lost, Shazam/Isis, Odd Couple and two episodes each of Tarzan, Batman, and Space Ghost. The sample from all three viewing periods (prime time, day time, and Saturday morning) includes programming from each of the three commercial networks. Each program was recorded on video tape.

The selection of interpersonal communication behaviors to be coded was determined by a twenty-second spot sample for the half-hour programs and a forty-second spot sample for the one-hour programs. A video fade-to-black was placed on the tape at these intervals. A total of 1,878 messages were coded for the prime time sample, 434 for the soap opera sample, and 612 for the cartoon sample.

Instrument. The method of content analysis is based on a relational coding system developed to assess interpersonal communication between two people.[34] The usefullness of this coding system for the study of sex role behavior is its focus on the control defining aspects of communication. Interactions are coded according to the grammatical format (talk-over, question, assertion, or non-complete) and metacommunication response mode (initiation/termination, answer, disconfirmation, topic change, order, instruction, extension, support, or non-support) of each message. A control code indicating the attempt of the message for control (dominance), acceptance of control (submission), or neutralizing of control (extension) is assigned by combining these two codes.

Coding. Eight coders, three female and five male, were given a fifty-hour training program in the use of the relational communication coding system. A procedure for pairing coders was developed in an attempt to minimize the bias that may account for high degrees of interrater reliability.[35] A team of three coders, one to key the messages to be coded and two to independently

code the keyed messages, was assigned to each program. The roles of keyer and coder as well as the composition of the viewing teams were rotated for each program. Overall interrater reliability was computed according to percentage agreement between coders, and for each of the three samples was .81.

In addition to the relational message code, each speaker and receiver was given a sex, age, race and occupation code.

Data Analysis. Data analysis provides a description of the various patterns of communication behavior according to the sex of the speaker and the sex of the receiver. Patterns of sex role interactions (male-male, male-female, female-female, female-male) are analyzed according to the format, response mode and control dimension of the message. Using the chi square statistic these analyses for each of the three samples of program types are made using 4 X 4 (interaction by format), 4 x 9 (interaction by response mode), and 4 X 3 (interaction by control dimension) contingency tables.

In addition to analyses of relational communication patterns, frequencies of senders and receivers of messages are determined for the various categories of sex, age, race and occupation.

Results

In general, the world of television depicted in this sample is consistent with previous findings: it is predominantly white, young, and male. The pattern was consistent across program types. Important to the implications of learning through symbolic interaction theory, the proportion of white, young and male characters was dramatically larger in children's programs.

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Insert Table 1 Here

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Differences between program types also occurred in the representation of occupations. In both prime time and soap operas, professional people accounted for the largest proportion of occupational types, although the kinds

of professions differed. In children's programming a rather curious picture was painted: the majority of characters were unemployed, personifications of evil, or unknowns.

The major communication pattern in all three program types was dyadic. Only 7 percent of the messages in prime time, 1 percent in soap operas, and 0.2 percent in children's programming were directed to a group of people.

In presenting the results of relational communication messages it is important to note that the first two hypotheses address characteristics of messages from the point of view of the speaker, and the third hypothesis addresses the characteristics of the message in relationship to the sex of the receiver. Analysis of the frequency of messages (Table 1) showed that males give the majority of the messages in all program types. Analysis at the level of the control dimension of the message (dominance, submission, or extension) showed that the "masculine language style" or dominance message clearly dominates as a pattern of interpersonal communication in the world of television (Table 2).

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Insert Table 2 Here

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Presenting the data according to the sex of the speaker and receiver further demonstrates this finding (Table 3). Of the possible six kinds of interpersonal communication behavior that could be presented (male dominance, male submission, male neutral, female domiance, female submission, female neutral), male dominance messages accounted for 33 percent in prime time, 26 percent in soap operas, and 41 percent in children's programming.

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Insert Table 3 Here

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From the point of view of the speaker, the results present a homogeneous pattern of dominance messages of interpersonal communication behaviors. Significant differences did not occur on the basis of the sex of the speaker. As can be seen graphically in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, the pattern held both within and across program types.

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Insert Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 Here

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Significant differences between males and females did occur, however, in the type of message received. In prime time programming a 4 X 9 contingency table shows an overall significant difference in the sex of the speaker and sex of the receiver by response mode ($p<.0000$, df=24). Analysis of the cells shows three specific differences: females received a higher proportion of answers ($p<.01$, df=1) and topic changes ($p<.03$, df=1) than they did messages in general; males received a higher proportion of non-supportive messages ($p<.01$, df=1) than they did messages in general.

Soap operas did not show an overall significant difference, although females did receive significantly more orders than messages in general. Children's programming shows an overall significant difference ($p<.0000$, df=24), as females received significantly more instructions ($p<.02$, df=1) than they did messages in general.

The differences that occurred in the types of messages that males and females received provides support for the third hypothesis. Females are the recipients of a greater frequency as well as more powerful dominance messages than are males. Each of the response modes which showed a significant difference when the sex of the receiver was female (answer, topic change, order, and instruction) were of the dominant type regardless of the format of the message. In addition, because the categories of the relational communication

system are hierarchical, the values of these dominance messages differ. A message coded as an "answer" of a "topic change" is considered a more powerful attempt to dominate than is a "non-support."

It should be noted that where a difference occurred when the sex of the speaker was male it was one of non-support. Males received a significantly higher proportion of non-supportive messages than they did messages in general. This may be an accurate though disturbing reflection of characteristic male-received communication. Studies investigating communication patterns in families consistently indicate that boys receive more non-support messages from parents and siblings than do girls.[36]

Conclusions

Interpersonal communication behavior in all three program types may be characterized as a struggle for dominance. In all three the most pervasive message type was the dominance message, a pattern which holds for both males and females. Although the availability of comparison data is limited, studies using the relational communication coding system in the general population suggest that the picture presented by television is not representative.[37] In addition, the behavior represented by television characters cannot be described as a non-sex typed pattern of communication behavior. If television functions to provide cues as to how our society expects us to act, both of these considerations become important.

If one were to base predictions of interpersonal communication patterns in television programming on the descriptions provided from the general population, one would predict: (1) a majority of neutralizing messages; (2) a pattern of oscillation between submission and neutralizing messages; and (3) a stabilization in a neutralizing (of c[illegible]ol) state. In studies of dyadic communication, using the relational commu[illegible]on coding system, Parks, Farace, and Rogers found nearly 50 percent of all messages to be neutralizing messages.[38] In

contrast, the majority of television messages were dominance messages. In addition, the patterns of the messages described by Parks, Farace and Rogers suggest that the struggle for dominance represented in this study of television programming is not characteristic of patterning that occurs in interpersonal communication behavior in general. Parks et al. found the most common communication pattern to be one that oscillates between extension and submission messages with a stabilization of the interactions in a neutral format. As the authors state:[39]

> The struggle for dominance in relational definition which would be characterized by both actors asserting control is a relatively infrequent occurrence.

Descriptions of relationships by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson provide comment on the differences found by Parks et al. and the data provided by this sample of television programming:[40]

> ...the more spontaneous and "healthy" a relationship, the more the relationship aspect of the communication recedes into the background. Conversely, "sick" relationships are characterized by a constant struggle about the nature of the relationship.

If one is seeking the "dramatic friction" of Norman Lear in order to maximize audience appeal and thus salability, these conclusions are probably not as disturbing as they might be to one interested in providing a reasonably healthy model of communication and a diversity of interpersonal communication behaviors. We are living in a time and in a society where both men and women are demonstrating dissatisfaction with stereotypic expectations of sex role behavior. Although the research investigating the concept of androgyny is limited, it does suggest that the androgynous individual is more flexible and better able to adapt to a diversity of situations.[41] In addition, research in the area of communication styles suggests that a non-sex stereotypic communication style is more effective.[42]

As the major mass medium in our society, and perhaps a medium which has an important effect on our behavior, it would seem appropriate that television programming reflect less stereotypic and more diverse types of behavior. And if, as Mead contends, social interaction is the process by which we develop our sense of self, it becomes particularly important that types of communication behavior be provided which allow for choice from a broad range of alternatives. "Theatrical friction" aside, the current world of television does not appear to offer this diversity and indeed may even be destructive of mentally healthy relational patterns.

TABLE I

Summary: Demographic Characteristics of Speakers

	Prime Time	Soap Operas	Childrens
Sex			
Male	62.5%	61.0%	81.0%
Female	37.5	39.0	19.0
Race			
White	93.0	94.5	99.5
Non-white	7.0	5.5	.4
Age			
26 to 45	53.0	75.2	43.4
46 to 60	22.0	17.5	5.4
Occupation			
Military/ Paramilitary	32.0	7.0	18.0
Professional/ Skilled	18.0	53.0	10.0
Unskilled/Clerical	22.0	1.0	
Unemployed/Student/ Houseperson	20.0	24.0	27.0
Personification of Evil	--	--	24.0

TABLE II

Summary: Control Dimension by Program Type

	Dominance	Submission	Extension
Prime Time	54.3%	20.7%	24.8%
Soap Operas	43.4	28.5	28.0
Children's	49.0	15.0	36.0

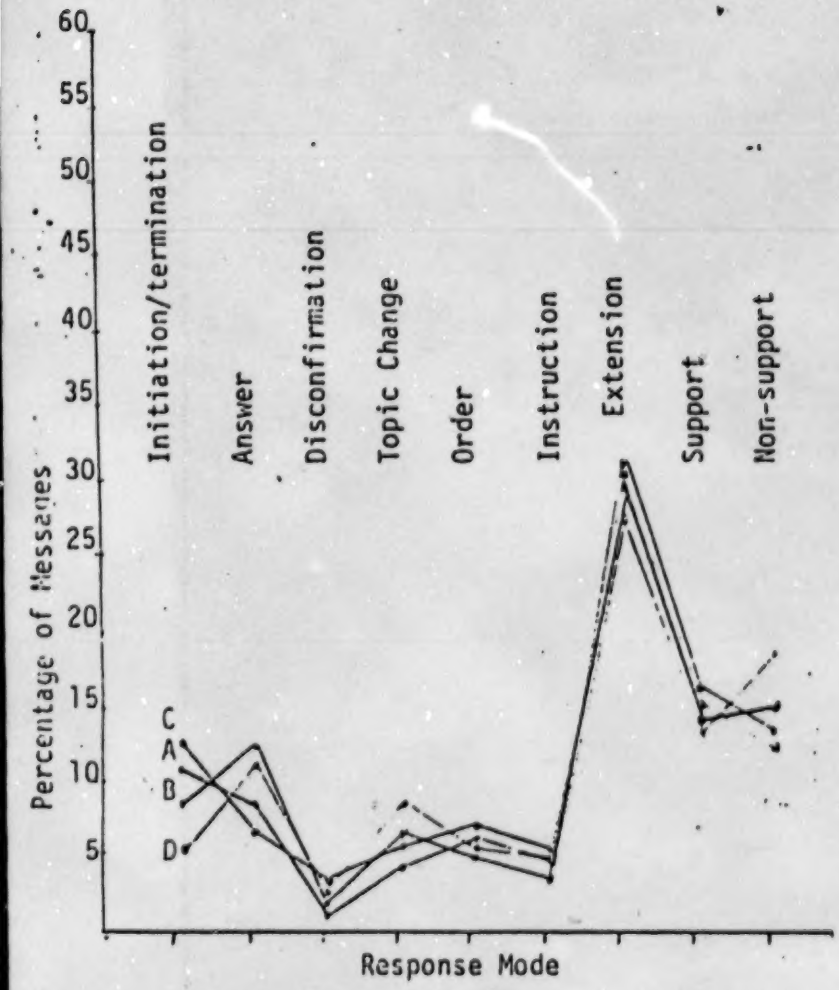
TABLE III

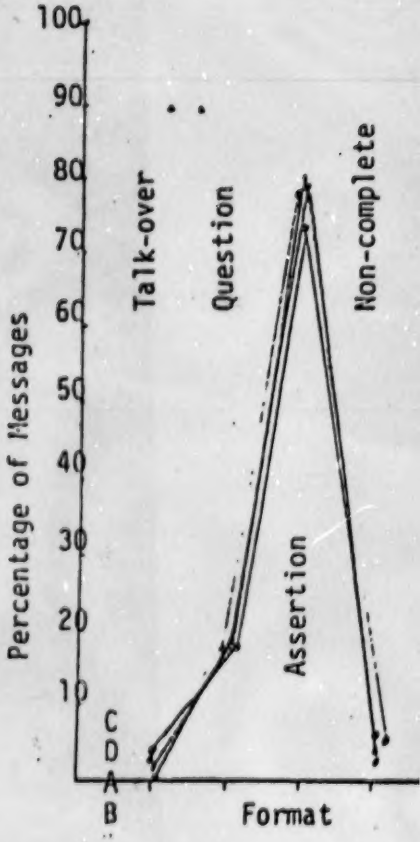
Messages of Males and Females by Control Dimension and Sex of Receiver

	Total*	Dominance	Submission	Extension
Prime Time				
Male-Male	60%	63%	60%	55%
Male-Female	40	37	40	45
Female-Male	59	56	56	58
Female-Female	41	44	44	42
Soap Operas				
Male-Male	52	58	61	71
Male-Female	38	42	39	29
Female-Male	56	56	56	56
Female-Female	44	44	44	44
Children's				
Male-Male	79	80	72	80
Male-Female	21	20	28	20
Female-Male	94	100	86	89
Female-Female	6	0	14	11

*Percentages of total male messages and total female messages.

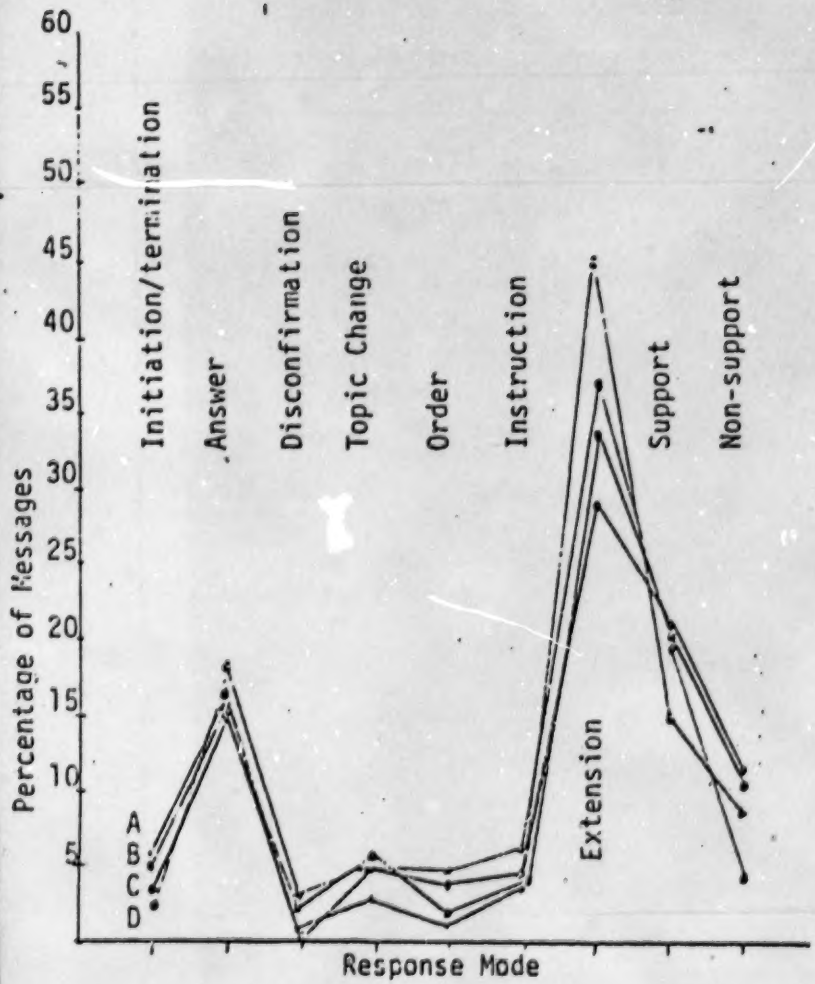
Figure 1
Response Mode and Format of Messages
Prime Time Programming

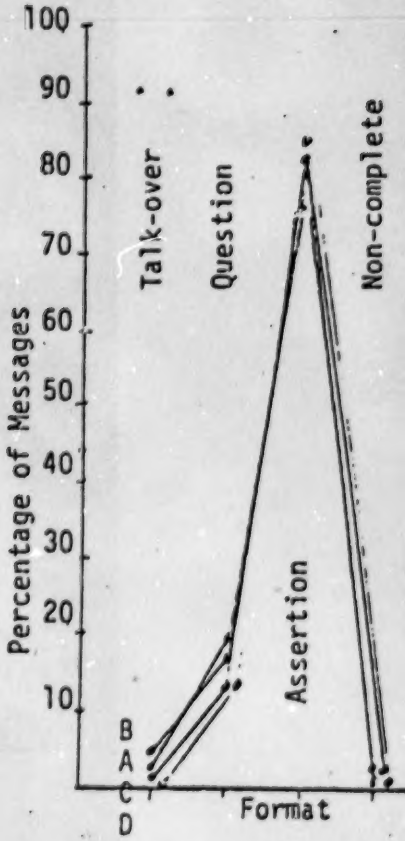




A=Male-Male B=Male-Female C=Female-Male D=Female-Female

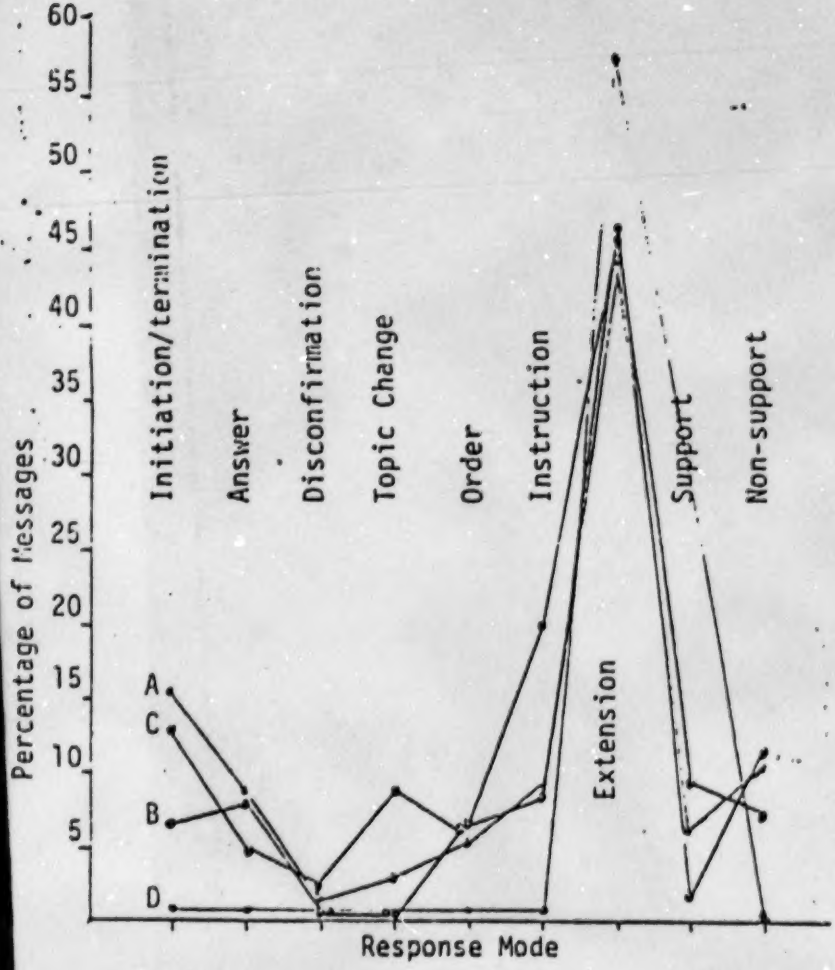
Figure 2
Response Mode and Format of Messages
Soap Opera Programming

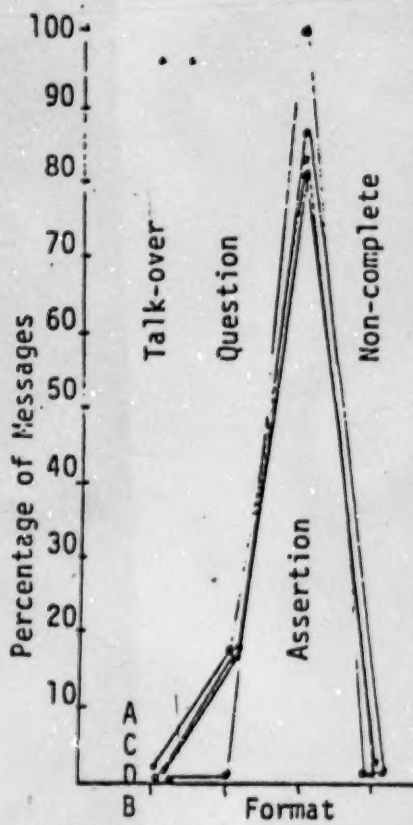




A=Male-Male B=Male-Female C=Female-Male D=Female-Female

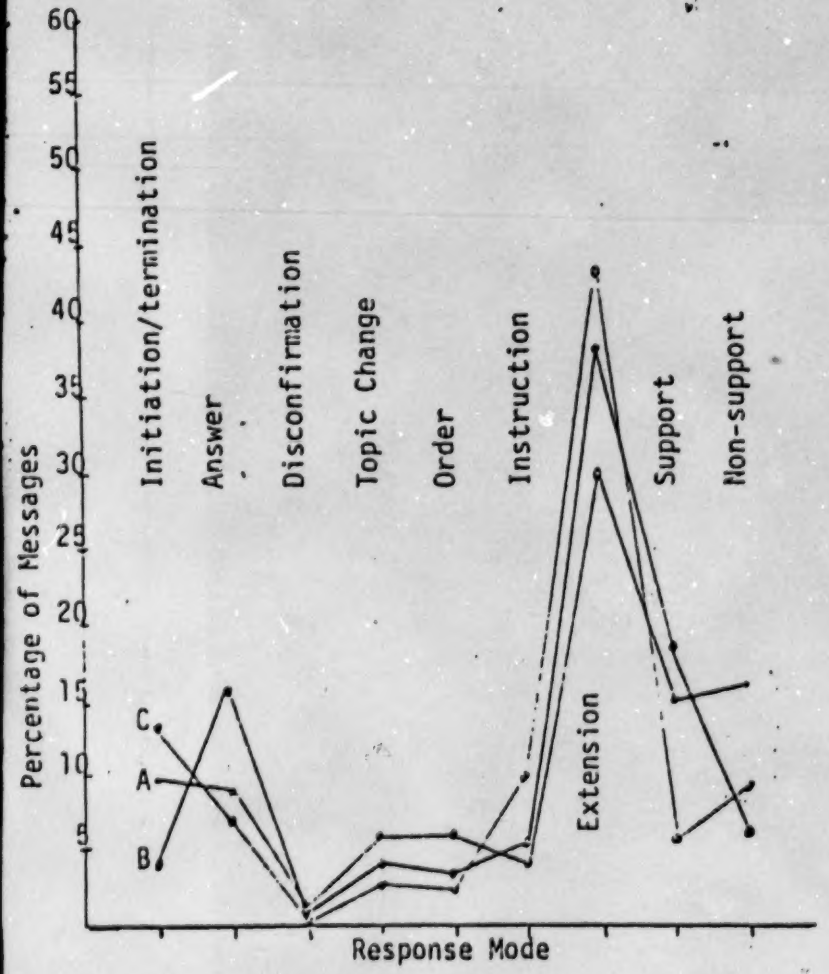
Figure 3
Response Mode and Format of Messages
Saturday Morning Programming

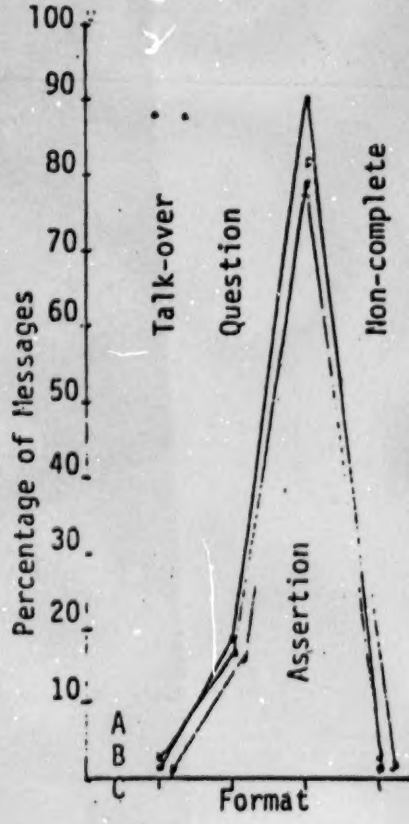




A=Male-Male B=Male-Female C=Female-Male D=Female-Female

Figure 4
Response Mode and Format of Messages
Across Program Types





A=Prime Time B=Soap Operas C=Saturday Morning Cartoons

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